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The Biographical Management of Risk and Uncertainty – British Veterans

It is an issue of increasing urgency to understand the development of soldiers' and veterans' ability to cope with risk and uncertainty since a growing number of them suffer mental health problems during and after duty. Research on stress has shown that ongoing experience of high risk and uncertainty can lead to mental health problems with long-lasting after-effects. While it is generally accepted that people cannot be prepared for traumatic experiences there seems to be a link between military culture and soldiers' ability to cope with traumatic combat experiences. General societal communication processes influence veterans' awareness and reporting of mental health problems as well. However, it is insufficiently examined how an experience leads to 'mental problems' in the first place even though clinical psychologists argue that a trauma is much more the result of social processes and circumstances than of the experience of a specific event itself. It is also not properly understood why some soldiers suffer serious mental health problems while others do not. The fundamental idea of the project is that soldiers, like other people, develop strategies to cope with risk and uncertainty during the course of their life and that these inform their subsequent decision-making and coping abilities.

The explorative study tries to get first answers. With the help of case studies and the method of biographical narrative interviewing the project examines how the soldiers' strategies and capabilities of managing risk and uncertainty is structured by their experiences before they became a soldier and during training and missions. Furthermore it examines how earlier civil and military experiences influence the veteran's capabilities to cope with risk and uncertainty in civil life later on.

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Investigator: Jens Zinn
Contact: j.zinn@kent.ac.uk; 01227 824165